

The Death of M. Butterfly

Yu-hsiu Cheng

ABSTRACT

M. Butterfly ends with the death scene, the same as *Madame Butterfly*. It seems David Henry Hwang did not utterly deconstruct this opera. As a matter of fact, Hwang endows this scene with special significance. The tragic ending implies that to understand each other, make friends and peacefully live together, people both in the East and the West have to utilize negative dialectics to clear through the stereotypes produced time and again by the cultural industry (Adorno) and to combat misconceptions inscribed in Orientalism (Said). Without a doubt, *Madame Butterfly* is a Westerner's wish-projection of an ideal Oriental woman (Kerr); the opera shows a sense of racial supremacy and imperialist mentality in that it describes how a submissive Oriental girl is bought by a cruel white man, loves him unconditionally, waits for him for a long time (three years) but is abandoned and then sacrifices her life for love. The relationship between the East and the West inevitably involves ideology and the desire of domination. *Madame Butterfly*, as a cultural product, tends to perpetuate the misconceptions it contains and to feminize the Orient as the opera has been performed repeatedly for nearly a century. *M. Butterfly* shows up as a countering play, which, in a sense, tries to break through these misunderstandings even though it takes the risk of giving the audience an opposite and cunning image of the "inscrutable Oriental." It, however, constructively enlightens us to get out of the prison of false ideas and to avoid a tragic ending.

KEY WORDS

cultural industry
ideology; prison
stereotypes

negative dialectics
Orientalism
misconceptions

The disemboweling ritual suicide at the end of *M. Butterfly* is the climax of the play; Henry David Hwang, the playwright, embodies his meditations on and an imaginary resolution of the power relationship between the East and the West in this suicide of Gallimard, the real Butterfly in this play. This tragic ending carries both literal and symbolic significance, which is the center of this paper. But before probing into the two levels of meanings, we have to look at what leads to Gallimard's downfall.

Three reasons account for Gallimard's failure. First of all, he does not have enough understanding of Chinese culture. As a French diplomat in Peking, he is not equipped with sufficient knowledge about China. Just as Cio-Cio-San, ignorant of all the odds against her, feels that she is the happiest woman in the world; ignorance makes Gallimard fall into "a beauty trap." It was a tradition that male actors play the female characters in Peking Opera. He, like Sarrasine, commits "the same error(s) of interpretation in pursuing his (their) objects of desire" (Kondo 22). Gallimard mirrors Sarrasine in that the former also falls in love with an opera singer and at last pays with his life for it. His conception of Oriental girls primarily comes from the Western cultural mass media, especially something like *Madame Butterfly*. His misperception enables Liling Song to gain the upper hand in their love.

Secondly, Gallimard is enthralled utterly by Song because of suffering some sexual traumas in his early days. In a sense, he was raped by Isabelle even though he said he really had enjoyed it, his first sexual experience. He married late in life and not for love but for his career; and he married a woman older than himself. Owing to this, he

may have a fantasy about love and hopes that it would come true some day. His ideal of love is that being a strong man, he can make girls laugh and cry at his will and that they must be young, beautiful and submissive to him without condition. This is the major reason he likes *Madame Butterfly* so much, in which an Oriental girl commits suicide after being abandoned by her cruel Western husband because he is her life and her whole universe. He feels the Madame Butterfly played by Song, an Oriental woman, is much more convincing than those played by huge Western women with bad makeup. When listening to Song's singing the lines of the death scene from *Madame Butterfly*, he thinks, "I believed this girl. I believed her suffering. I wanted to take her in my arms—so delicate, *even I* could protect her, take her home, pamper her until she smiled" (Hwang 15-6, italics mine). *Madame Butterfly* satisfies his fantasy. He is greatly attracted by the Butterfly performed by Song. Nevertheless, his impulse to "take her in his arms" stops after his encounter with Song, who claims that his fantasy is imperialist. Song's view about this opera stuns Gallimard. Song says,

Consider it this way: what would you say if a blonde homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it's an Oriental who kills herself for a Western—ah!—you find it beautiful. (Hwang 17)

By reversing the racial identities of the hero and heroine in *Madame Butterfly*, Song displays the racism hid under a sad and beautiful love story, and that makes Gallimard speechless at the same time for even he cannot deny that truth.

This first meeting proves that Song is not only a beautiful but a smart and patriotic girl; no wonder her submission fills Gallimard with double pleasure. In later encounters when Gallimard senses that Song

has interest in him and she/he feels inferior to both he and Western women, he feels greatly delighted and begins to exert his power as a man to win Song's submission: he has not gone to see Song's performance for eight weeks. He feels "for the first time that rush of power—the absolute power of a man" (Hwang 32). Song's letters announce his victory; she/he becomes his mistress.

Song's existence once and again reinforces his dignity as a man. She/He knows more or less about his affair with another woman, but she/he does not quarrel with him directly. Gallimard imagines Song's suffering in the same way Madame Butterfly feels about Pinkerton's unfaithfulness: "She would cry, alone, into those wildly soft sleeves, once full of possessions, now empty to collect her tears. It was her tears and her silence that excited me, every time I visited Renee" (Hwang 56). "Gallimard would never dare treat his wife or his girlfriend in such abusive ways—perhaps because he knows he could never make them suffer as he imagines Song Liling suffers" (Kehde 243). He feels he has found his ideal love—he is the master, who can completely control the happiness and sadness of his love. It never occurred to him that this love would result in ruin.

In addition to cultural ignorance and early-day sexual traumas, his fascination for the opera, *Madame Butterfly*, leads most of all to his downfall. This opera, as a cultural product, exercises great influence on the Westerners' view of the Oriental. According to Adorno, all cultural products, including high and mass ones, have been completely commercialized. They do provide people with entertainment, information and the like. But, on the other hand, the great power of the cultural industry, especially mass media, also soothes people's protests against the injustice of the society; most cultural products act as doses of euphoria for the people in the modern age. The resistance in people's consciousness is replaced with conformity. Instead of stepping into a liberated state because of the high development of the productive force as Marx expected, human beings are filled with false consciousness, and under the powerfully ideological domination, they gradually lose their negative thinking against the status quo and turn into, in Marcuse's terms, one-

dimensional man. Adorno believes:

The result for the physiognomy of the culture industry is essentially a mixture of streamlining, photographic hardness and precision on the one hand, and individualistic residues, sentimentality and an already rationally disposed and adapted romanticism on the other. (88)

Adorno sighs that the development of rationality since the Enlightenment has liberated human beings from the bondage of mythic powers; however, it now again gradually produces a new and even more absolute form of domination. Modern people, to a great extent, live in a new age of myth. Products of the cultural industry are instruments which help myths survive.

What is worse, people are likely to possess some false consciousness for a long time. Times are changing; original images, because of being used and reproduced repeatedly, become stereotypes. What is embodied in *Madame Butterfly* is one of them. It is just too naïve of Benjamin to think that reproduction “pry[ing] an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception” (223).¹

Madame Butterfly interests the Western audience; both men and women love it a lot. It “was not only Puccini who enjoyed the spectacle of *Butterfly*’s suffering. It filled the opera houses; it was something people wanted” (Kerr 124).² But as Adorno points out, the cultural industry makes the customers believe they are the kings; they, in fact, are “an object of calculation” (85). The audience’s interest directs the creations of some cultural producers. Asian European writer, Onoto Watanna, revised the story of *Butterfly* into *A Japanese Nightingale*, in which the cross-cultural marriage ends in happiness. Nevertheless, this version lost in competition with Belesco’s reversion of John Luther Long’s “*Madame Butterfly*,” in which *Butterfly* is deserted and commits suicide (Ling 187-9). Audiences love this version with the sad ending more. Puccini’s story tracks back to this version. For nearly a century, the opera has pleased thousands of Westerners. They enjoy it a lot. Nevertheless, its underlying

implications need exploring.

From an Oriental point of view, Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* is a girl without much personality nor many principles except dignity. It cannot be denied that "Butterfly is clearly a wish-projection of what a Western male imagination supposed an Oriental woman might be like—beautiful, exotic, loving, yielding and not binding, giving all and demanding nothing" (Kerr 125). But a deep scrutiny into this opera will find that she comes closer to a woman of utter self-abdication. To be with Pinkerton, she gives up her friends, family and even her religion—the representation of a person's soul—and then makes him her whole world. This kind of girl is, though young, fresh, lovely and charming for a man at the beginning of their encounter, too submissive, boring and lacking in challenge for him; he will lose interest in her at last. And that is really Butterfly's fate: being deserted.

Another and the major reason Butterfly is driven to death is Pinkerton's insincerity. "The whole world over, the Yankee travels, casting his anchor wherever he wants. Life's not worth living unless he can win the hearts of the fairest maidens, then hotfoot it off the premises ASAP" (Puccini, qtd in Hwang 7). From the very beginning, Pinkerton does not intend to stay long, not to say forever, with Butterfly. Both the consul and the marriage broker know the truth, but no one would tell her. After having promised that he would come back when the robin nests, Pinkerton, returning to America, marries a Caucasian woman!

The producer of the opera unconsciously shows both racism and sexism in the fact that the Westerner, Pinkerton, does not take a submissive Oriental woman's love and life seriously. Despite the fact that Pinkerton is not very good-looking, nor bright or worthy, Butterfly faithfully waits for him and sacrifices her life for her dignity, for the benefit of their son and primarily for Pinkerton—saving him from a dilemma. Regardless of these disparities, the opera has been very popular in the Western world. For nearly a century, men in the West have regarded Butterfly, such a woman without much personality, as a beautiful, brave and ideal female. Although they may

want to give Pinkerton a kick, very few of them would miss the chance to be a Pinkerton.

A study of Said's works on Orientalism and imperialism may help us understand more the characteristics of the opera, *Madame Butterfly*. The term, Orientalism, carries with it at least three interdependent meanings: first, it has to do with academic study; second, it is a "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident';" and third, it is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (*Orientalism* 2-3). The study of the Orient originated from the attempt to understand and define this Other with a view to dominating it. In the colonial age, many scholars, poets, novelists, philosophers and the like (culture producers) contributed much to the content of Orientalism, which formed, in Foucault's term, a discourse, and the use of what Gramsci calls cultural hegemony stabilized and strengthened it. Gradually it became the major source of understanding of the Orient for the Westerners, colonists and imperialists.

The Orientalists, who defined the Orient as the Other in the very beginning, could not holistically understand the Orient for it is not a static but dynamic subject of thought and action. Their aim to grasp may fail because of their unconscious imperialist mentality and sense of racial supremacy. The imperialists felt that it was the white man's burden³ to civilize the colored, and they had the duty to bring progress to the uncivilized. The Westerner was "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress" (Conrad 66). Now, in the twentieth century, even though direct colonialism has largely ended, imperialism "lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices" (*Culture and Imperialism* 9).

To combat Orientalism, people in the East, Said advises, should engage in reinscription—a kind of resistance writing—as Fanon calls for. They have to rewrite what has been wrongly inscribed in cultural products. Only by this type of writing can they correct Westerners'

view of them. *M. Butterfly* is a reinscription of a half Asian—Hwang, an Asian American.

Cultural products put out and at the same time perpetuate Orientalism; *Madame Butterfly* is one of them. It is really a surprise that John Luther Long had never been to Asia. Puccini was initiated by Long/Belasco's version; Long, whose Butterfly story is the basis of Belasco's one-act play *Madame Butterfly*, was inspired by Pierre Loti's novel *Madame Chrysanthème*. Loti had been to Asia for only a month (Kerr 119-120)! It means these artistic works are primarily based upon imagination though they contain some real materials. As keys to imagining and making sense of the Oriental, these works impress much the Western audience and leave it with a lot of wrong ideas, which include, as Hwang points out in *M. Butterfly*: Oriental women are by and large modest, shy, and submissive; their mouths says no, but their eyes say yes; "they want to be treated bad" (6); they must surrender to the Westerners because it is their destiny; the "Orientals simply want to be associated with whoever shows the most strength and power" (45); "Orientals will always submit to a greater force (46). *Madame Butterfly*, now as one of the ten great operas in the West (Kondo 7), undoubtedly has had an influence in the West.

Madame Butterfly is Gallimard's favorite opera; he represents those Westerners whose minds are obsessed by the image of the Orientalist Madame Butterfly. And this results in his failure. He consciously models Song on Madame Butterfly, but he "seems oblivious that he is inventing a character" for her too (Kehde 244). Song knows much of his mentality and reinforces his misconceptions. Only at the end does Gallimard realize that it is he who has been Butterfly, but Song, the real Pinkerton.

The disemboweling suicide scene at the end of the play seems to correspond to the ending of *Madame Butterfly*; if so, it seems for some critics no more a "deconstructivist *Madame Butterfly*." The suicide ending of Madame Butterfly fills us with pathos; we sigh for her faithfulness, sacrificial spirit and dignity, but, at the same time, we feel resentful of the coward Pinkerton. *M. Butterfly*'s ending makes us think the whole play over to find the playwright's intention.⁴ Hwang

did not decide on Gallimard's suicide from the very start of his writing. In an interview, he said,

I didn't know, however, if that [the Frenchman was in fact Butterfly] meant that the French diplomat was going to commit suicide the way Butterfly does in the opera, and that's something I kind of left open. So there's a certain amount of variation within that structure. (Frocht 128)

Anyway, Hwang, at last, also ends the play in suicide; there must be a special significance here. It can be investigated from both the literal and symbolic levels.

Literally, Gallimard chooses fantasy instead of reality even though he knows the difference between them. He decides to reside in the world he prefers, and he still insists on his view of Oriental women. He only admits that he is so fond of the character of Madame Butterfly that that love blinds him and makes him see nothing but a woman in the mirror. "The image of the mirror here suggests the complex psychic dynamics of projection and interjection; of gaze and reflection, and of narcissism and idealization" (Chang 745). His love for the image of Madame Butterfly confounds him when he meets and lives with Song. At last he dies for love; in fact he perishes for his own delusion.

Moreover, Gallimard's suicide means that he still resists reality, which differs much from his own views, his fantasy. Madame Butterfly confronts the reality of being abandoned and kills herself. Gallimard's suicide shows that he is actually the Butterfly, but he shuns away from the cruel reality; his suicide therefore stands as "an effective form of a resistance" (Remen 394).

That the whole play comes out of Gallimard's imagination in the prison cell matters much. "We are all prisoners of our time and place," said Gallimard trying to persuade his audience to understand his story from his point of view; he really is the prisoner of his time and place (Hwang 47). Having experienced the encounter with Song, he doesn't stick to reality but to his knowledge of the Oriental garnered from

cultural products like *Madame Butterfly*. This insistence means he is still bounded by the prison of the Orientalist discourses. Gallimard is therefore doomed to die in the prison of his own ideology.

This tragic ending implies, on the symbolic level, people in the West must have a basic and correct cultural understanding and adjust their views of the Orient; otherwise they may come to a dead end when dealing with people in the East. Westerners should employ their critical ability and negative way of thinking to filter out information such as stereotypes and outdated conventions produced once and again by the culture industry and academic studies.⁵ They need to “accept the complexity and ambiguity of every life,” and have imagination to open themselves up “to different cultural possibilities, blurred boundaries, and rearrangements of power” (Kondo 21). Flexible thinking and a willing mind are the preconditions of communicating and understanding each other. Both a sense of racial supremacy and imperialist mentality need to be gotten rid of.

From *M. Butterfly* we learn that the East and the West have to treat each other sincerely; only on that basis can they become real friends. Gallimard’s death can be regarded as a warning. In *Madame Butterfly*, the Oriental is in a submissive position and at last sacrificed for love. In *M. Butterfly*, the condition is reversed. Both of the cases go to extremes. The golden rule is the middle course. Both conversing with and loving the other require the clearing away of racial mythology “in which one makes certain assumptions based on this kind of exterior covering and these features... may or may not have anything to do with the person that’s within” (Cooperman 372). Samuel P. Huntington, a profound contemporary scholar at Oxford University, predicts in *The Clash of Civilizations and The Remaking of World Order* that seven or eight civilizations will become stronger in the future and the major clash of all between them will come from the difference of their cultures. The East and the West will have more and more chances to contact each other in the future. To live peacefully on the earth, people of different civilizations have to resist racial misconceptions, learn about the languages and cultural backgrounds of one another. The death of M. Butterfly shows us the

tragic outcome of a contrary attitude.

NOTES

¹ Benjamin thinks that by mechanical reproduction, a work of art can promulgate its evocative and edifying functions even though it may lose its aura. On this point, Adorno disagrees with him and feels that Benjamin is too naïve: mass production of cultural productions results in, not enlightenment, but another form of ideological control.

² Kerr believes “*Butterfly*’s fate is of no historical moment, yet it has historical meaning” (129). The opera embodies political, economic, racial and cultural dimensions of the Orient. His opinions are cited as concrete examples of what misconceptions of the Orient are formed under the influence of this opera in my paper here.

³ A reading of Rudyard Kipling’s poem, “The White Man’s Burden,” will find the Westerners’ imperialist mentality. The most famous line of Kipling is, as Hwang shows us partially in *M. Butterfly*: “East is East and West is West; they will never meet.”

⁴ Skloot feels that Gallimard’s transformation into *Butterfly*’s kimono produces “androgynous fulfillment” but the suicide ending is “highly ambiguous” (61). He asks many questions about the meaning of the suicide near the end of his article, which inspired this topic for my paper.

⁵ Hwang points out there still exists “negative stereotypes of Asia or Asian American characters in films and on television” (Moss-Coane 289-90). In “Orientalism Reconsidered,” Said also refers to the fact that though a literary text can gain some of its identity from readers in a different age, still “the privilege was rarely allowed the Orient, the Arabs, or Islam, which separately or together were supposed by mainstream academic thought to be confined to the fixed status of an object frozen once and for all in time by the gaze of western percipients” (214).

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor W. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Ed. J.M. Bernstein. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1978.
- Chang, Hsiao-hung. "Cultural/Sexual/Theatrical Ambivalence in M. Butterfly." *Tamkang Review: A Quarterly of Comparative Studies Between Chinese and Foreign Literature* 23.1-4(1992-1993): 735-55.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Youth/Heart of Darkness/Typhoon/The Secret Sharer*. Taipei: Bookman Books, 1992.
- Cooperman, Robert. "Across the Boundaries of Cultural Identity: An Interview with David Henry Hwang." *Staging Difference: Cultural Pluralism in American Theatre and Drama*. Ed. Marc Maufort. New York: Peter Lang, 1995.
- Frocht, Deborah. "David Henry Hwang." *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists*. Ed. Jackson R. Bryer. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1995.
- Hwang, David Henry. *M. Butterfly*. New York: Plum, 1989.
- Kehde, Suzanne. "Engendering the Imperial Subject: The (De)Construction of (Western) Masculinity in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*." *Fictions of Masculinity: Crossing Cultures, Crossing Sexualities*. Ed. Peter F. Murphy. New York: New York UP, 1994.
- Kerr, Douglas. "David Henry Hwang and the Revenge of Madame Butterfly." *Asia Voice in English*. Ed. Chan Mimi and Harris Roy. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 1991.
- Kondo, Dorinne K. "*M. Butterfly*: Orientalism, Gender, and a Critique of Essentialist Identity." *Cultural Critique* 16 (Fall 1990): 5-29.
- Ling, Amy. "The Origin of the Image of Butterfly." *Representing Politics and Chinese American Literature*. Ed. Shan Te-Hsing & Ho Wen-ching. Taipei: Institute of European and American Studies (Academia Sinica), 1996.
- Moss-Coane, Marty. "David henny Hwang." *Speaking on Stage*:

Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights. Ed. Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1996.

Remen, Kathryn. "The Theater of Punishment: David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*." *Modern Drama* 37.3 (1994 Fall): 391-400.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

———. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

———. "Orientalism Reconsidered." *Literature, Politics, and Theory*. Ed. Francis Barker. New York: Methuen, 1986.

Skloot, Robert. "Breaking the Butterfly: The Politics of David Henry Hwang." *Modern Drama* 33.1(1990): 59-66.